

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

For the week of October 27, 1997

This issue, we explore two free sites that create customized road maps and driving directions.

=*=*= CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE =*=*=

I have no sense of direction. When I get in the car, even armed with a road atlas, compass, Sherpa guide and one of those nifty global positioning system radios, it's more likely that I'll end up asking for directions at a 7-11 than arriving at my destination on time.

All hope is not lost for me, thanks to the Internet's mapping and directions resources. I've replaced the Sherpa with MapBlast and MapQuest: two mapping sites that give better directions. (Besides, the camels were stinking up the car.) MapBlast and MapQuest are sites that do similar things: they generate customized maps and provide directions for driving between two points. The technology behind this is amazing -- you may find yourself pulling up maps of the town you grew up in, directions for getting from home to the market, and so on just to see if it's right. Although the sites aren't perfectly accurate all of the time, I've been impressed with their accuracy.

First, the mapping tools. Both sites will create a map pinpointing a location: type an address, and in a moment you'll see a street map centered on that area. You can then zoom in or zoom out, pan around, or print the map. MapBlast can only map United States locales (except the state of Alaska); MapQuest can create maps of many countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. I can't vouch for the accuracy of their maps of those far-away places... if you're headed for Slovakia, make yourself a map and let me know if you find your way back.

Things really get fun when you start using the driving directions tools. With them, you type your starting and destination addresses, and in a disarmingly short amount of time, you are presented with detailed instructions on how to get there. For instance: Turn RIGHT onto N SANTA ANITA AVE., Take the I-210 WEST ramp., Merge onto I-210 W., Take the I-5 NORTH RAMP exit... Hey, even I can follow these directions. These tools work just as well for finding your way to a new restaurant across town as they do for planning a cross-country trip.

Why do you need both MapBlast and MapQuest? Well, I suppose you don't -- you can certainly pick just one and stick with it. But the two sites use separate databases from which they build their maps. With roads closing and changing names, new construction going on all the time and the like, no map is ever perfect. As a result, I've found that occasionally one of the sites manages to create a better map or more accurate directions. If you're not navigationally-impaired like myself, using both sites probably isn't necessary.

MapQuest has more tricks up its sleeve, including a traveller's guide called TravelPlan USA. Tell it where you're going and TravelPlan will offer details on hotels, restaurants, and attractions in the area. A related site, MoveQuest, is aimed at folks that are planning on moving by offering info about local schools, real estate prices, and other info that's good to have if you're new in town.

There's also a direction-finding service on CompuServe itself, "Way To Go". This tool encompasses all of the U.S. and Germany, but doesn't work for cross-country trips, as your starting location and destination need to be in the same general region of the country. Here's a neat trick: if you need to find a nearby bank, hotel, or tourist attraction but don't have an exact address, Way To Go can find one and show you the way. Once you've straggled away from the computer, though, you're on your own finding your way back.

=*=*= SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE =*=*=

MapBlast: <http://www.mapblast.com>

MapQuest: <http://www.mapquest.com>

MoveQuest: <http://www.movequest.com>

Way To Go: Go WAY TO GO

=*=*= THE END =*=*=

The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in the NetAnswers library.

I write the songs that make the whole world sing. I wrote the songs of love and special things. I wrote the songs that make the young girls cry, "copyright 1997 by Kevin Savetz."